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HOUSEHOLD GODS

MATTHEW SIMPSON

Not squawky and carefree like other kids
Who skipped and hopscotched
Through the early, dusky hours of evening,
But cunning, dangerous, like hawks,
We lurked with cloak and spyglass,
Training our sly eyes on them;
And mapped by inference their dark lives,

Traced move by move our massive myth.
Their house stood in its own untended grounds,
Olympian stronghold, privet-guarded, among trees;
A rusty gate clanked in the wind;
Smoke drifted up : we knew
They were at home; hoped for a sign.

An upstairs light flashed on : would Helen
Brush her hair; soon leave that house
For some mysterious rendezvous?
The curtains were slowly drawn across.
We saw the shadow of a tall goddess.

We lingered, debating whether to leave off,
Slink home,—this image one night's work,
Or wait, keyed up for more celestial sights :
Perhaps a god or goddess might descend,
Whom we could shadow, private eyes.
Another detail of their holy lives might be revealed.
We whispered nervous round the wind-chafed trees.

And as we talked, like bandits planning ambush in the hills,
She came; moved stately down the gravel path.
Alert, we watched her swing the rusty gate,
Heard its hard, significant clank. . . .
Helen, untouchable goddess, Mona Lisa, Sphinx,
Deigning to meet the night and the wind.

Ducking behind walls, dashing down alleys,
We paralleled her course; from doorways' dark
We watched her plinthed among people
Waiting for a bus. We worshipped her;
Hated the world for her and the family gods,
Wishing ourselves favoured slaves of that Olympian set.
She boarded the bus, was driven away
To some gay world not ours.

And we recorded in our secret books,
Not that a goddess passed before our gaze,
But, naively nearer truth: '7.46 p.m.—
Helen, grey hat, black coat and high-heeled shoes,
Proceeded down Terrace Road to catch the 14 bus.'
—The static data of our glorious myth.

Now, growing older has destroyed our myth;
Time has emptied that house among trees
Of all our household gods.
Time has shown us green.
And our gods left, as human as ourselves.

SHAP: THE A6

Geoffrey Holloway

Keep your eyes off the road, gut and glory
of the commerce-drive gouging desperately through,
its only arbiters quick profits, time.

Keep your eyes off the means, moaning trucks
with hump backs and heavy straps,
their noses to a granite grindstone.

Off the crews, the regulars: jerkined toughs,
the smoke of woodbines like a pickup's hair
across the face, in the sweaty thought. . . .

Off the tramps, the casuals: grey butts
wet with dismissal suffering
the sun's charity, the grit's outrageous gall. . . .

Forget: let your loosened gaze
(a falcon stooping at a king's command)
give audience only to the avalanche of dales:—

those heart-held valleys that the Norseman knew,
that took him from the bitterness of beaked ships
—the dragon prow and loud, ambitious oar—

to fiords waveless and immutable,
where no keels countermarched the may's foam,
and words once scattered on a salt wind

came seasoned back, to spice a softer tongue,
with mead in ram's horn helmets, hung swords,
and the lordliness of flaxen hair.

DECEMBER MERCY

GEOFFREY HOLLOWAY

The furtive autumn turns to flagrant fox,
the slaughter-showy is itself betrayed,
run to earth, left bloody on the rocks,
for carting by the casual spade.

The clay's tight-lipped, has no reply
but monosyllable, the crafty sky
hangs mistletoe, faint yellow-grey,—
and wind, wind, scours pumice-dry.

Stiff the pasture, cold-glittering with straw,
and the rooks stumping arrogantly through,
undertakers, sourly sure
frost will soon hunt up some work to do.

Devastation, blight, dead,
then me, in crunching boots,
the dog a few bleak steps ahead,
the barrow stuck with matted roots,—

attrition's farmer, stark, inert :
a wind-cut coat, a dull machine
for shifting thistles, trimming dirt,—
hopeless, till the splendid clean

insistence of the snowy hill
behind the bend is ripely seen;
and slow across its holy-still
devoted breast expectant leans

woodsmoke, a winter-vein
Mary-blue, returning to the heart.
Tiredness drops from me then
—worry, smudging, smart—

and certain as the child that grows
in faith's tremendous lap
behind the starch and sting I know
kindness, running sap.

DEPARTURES

GABRIEL PEARSON

It is now time to leave : this room is cluttered
with fragments of a settled, unwanted life :
I have tied my love-letters into bundles, muttered
farewells to the familiar heavens and the landlord's wife.

The last pain of departure will be the friend
who whispers into my ears : Yes, we will miss you.
But the false bonhomie of a handgrip ends
the truth of his need—his truth would cloud my issue.

It is hard birth, this leaving life, this dying
into the desert of nomadic faces :
the whore's sad painted cheeks, the newsboys' crying
of wars and weddings in unusual places.

The smooth thunder of the express may grow
my condition : a world of trundled cases, labels
stuck over each other, bright advertisements for the show,
palms, conferences, cool drinks at separate tables.

The navel-string is wrenched free; I am ready :
lines of a former life erased, clean page
on which the writing, devious and unsteady,
will be scrawled by the crossed nib of the age.

Terrible freedom. And more terrible fear
of the vigil in alien rooms, when ghosts crowd round
muttering familiar phrases; and the drear
soft face bobs up of the man I should have drowned.

And to drive those ghosts away, to keep that man down,
I shall settle once more; and spawn a cluttered life;
make new connections and create a town;
father five children on an ageing wife.

And want to depart again. Alas, I may
come back to this room, those letters, my old friend's need;
but find swept boards and the turfed churchyard clay,
and being an old man learn to die indeed.

Higher, nearer to your hot ambition
 Reached your wings,
Painfully, lifting your life from the regular tides,
 Left the sides
Of a thousand mountains where Orpheus sings,
To grapple with destruction; no matter now
 Of your fall—
But had you heard the singing flight of swallows,
 And seen shadows,
Your shadow only, falling from your tall
Attainment, would it not have been enough
 To admire?
Why stretch intention to the height of heat
 That must defeat
Your climb, your triumph drowned in cruel fire?
Watch, had you watched your shadow moving
 Over land
And always reverting to proclaim your flight,
 Then you might
Have satisfied the tension you demand.
But in clear skies, where the only aim
 Would destroy
The urging that impelled you, you denied
 Shadow and tide,
Surrendered to desire instead of joy.

(Acknowledgements are due to Christopher Levenson for permission to reprint the above poem from an anthology of Cambridge verse shortly to be published by the Fantasy Press.)

Contributions of verse and short prose fiction, original or translated, or critical articles are invited, and should be sent to the Editors at Downing College by December 20. Writing from outside the Universities, and letters for publication, are welcomed.

TIME AND FEVERS BURN AWAY

ROBIN McLAREN.

The doors rolled to and for a moment there was silence. Then there was a jerk and the train moved off out of the trellised light of the station and into the sun that came hard and bright through the windows. The young man moved to the other side of the carriage where there was shadow on the pages of his book and tried to read. Every now and then he looked up and out at the dingy world passing outside. It aroused in him, preoccupied though he was, the conflicting emotions that he knew so well and distrusted so much in an intensified form. He hated it, because it had been born out of a social injustice whose existence now his conscience would not allow him to forget or condone, so that he looked for signs of its remnants even where the fierce thing had ceased to exist. He loved it because he was able to find beauty in it and this he felt to be a triumph over himself, even though he deprecated such a demonstration of his superiority over so many of his fellows. Then the train drew into a tunnel and he caught himself studying his own reflection in the window, wondering whether he looked tired, or resigned or anxious, and whether he would be a good enough actor to look all three when the time came. Then a series of barred circles and the train had stopped at one more station. He knew what it would be but the name seemed to stand out in accusation. For him it had no significance except as another station, but a station between the place where he had always caught the train and the place that he had never wanted to get out at again. It was somewhere where he had never had any reason to leave the train—he didn't even know what he would find if he did—but it was part, and always would be part of that journey he had made so often. It was a link; and a link, too, between this time and all those other times. It filled him, as he said over the name until it became three meaningless syllables, with memories that were too strong and revived in him too much confusion to be dissipated by the scorn of his habitual analysis.

As the train moved off he felt a growing tension in himself that grew to a momentary panic. He knew how many more stations there were, and if their names separated him from where he would get out he knew they represented only a few minutes travelling. When he had arranged the meeting he had thought that the preceding months had given him some detachment and that he would be able to remain calm. He knew now that he was wrong and that the ordeal which was to come would be of his own making. He held his book tight and forced himself to read line by line. Angus Wilson. He hoped idly that a discriminating hypothetical observer would see in this both the bitterness that his choice indicated and that he could still laugh at himself.

Suddenly the station. He was unprepared and felt that he had needed the last minute anticipation that he had succeeded in avoiding. He felt cheated of its strange comfort. And now there was so little time before he would meet her. As he had counted the number of underground stations before he would have to get out, so now he found himself thinking of the street corners he would have to turn before he reached the door of her hostel. As he walked he took in almost fiercely every detail of the buildings that he passed, though the route was so familiar to him that he could have negotiated it blindfold. It was as though he was deliberately stocking a memory that he knew he would often wish to refer to; carefully docketting, each with its attached and accurately noted degrees of pain, what he told himself were his last experiences in the state of hope, however consciously precarious, that he had come in.

The last turning, the short street anonymous in its Georgian dignity, and he rang the bell of the hostel. The girl who let him in asked him who he wanted.

"Eleanor James," he said. The sound of her full name seemed strange after so long and he heard himself speak it as though it were someone else's voice and someone else's name. He wondered if he sounded nervous. The girl consulted an 'In—Out' board and then spoke into a microphone. As her name echoed through the building his thoughts seemed to burst from the small voice in which he had announced it and his last reserve was stripped from him, leaving his love unashamed like a tall flame. But the booming voice drained all his strength from him and apprehension at his nakedness filled him as he sat waiting for her.

"Hallo, Richard."

It was a friend of her's and he knew that she had come down for him. She turned and he followed her, no longer wondering. The long passages only made him feel more like a prisoner; a prisoner being led to trial who, knowing his guilt, has suddenly learnt that he must conduct his own defence.

They went into her room and he felt no sudden shock when he saw her. The barrier of months without any communication from her had disappeared. He felt neither a surge of new love nor the indifference that in his more detached moments he had wished for. Seeing her he loved her and it was as if he had last seen her only yesterday. What he had felt in the last months had not been false; he had not worshipped idols in the name of the true god. He was both frightened and reassured.

She did not look at him, nor say anything to show that she felt anything on seeing him. She seemed to take his presence with an acceptance that might have been resignation. He took the cup of coffee she offered him automatically and drank it uneasily, not knowing what to say.

"We'd better go over and see Anita," she said to her friend. She looked at him for what seemed the first time.

"Anita's ill," she said. "She's been working too hard and then there's this trouble about her living so far away and her digs aren't good anyway. She's so independent in some ways but she's like a child in others. Mary and I just have to tell her what to do when she's not well and she's never been exactly full of health, has she?"

He agreed. He had met Anita once or twice and remembered her as an intelligent girl with long hair in unplaited ropes.

"You will come with me, won't you?" said Eleanor to him. She was being very polite, but at the same time he thought he caught a glimpse of her old teasing look so that memories of the time she had laughed at him before being at first hurt by his faults and then indifferent to them rose up to choke him.

"Of course I will," he said.

He was glad that the visit offered him a chance to prolong his hope. He could be with her without being alone with her.

There was an awkward break in the conversation. Eleanor got up.

"Well, I think we'd better go," she said. "There's no need for you to come, Mary."

They walked together to the library where Anita was working. When they found her he noted absently that she did look ill. Or was it just the effect of her straggling hair, so untidy that it seemed almost part of a pose? He left Eleanor to see to her. There was after all nothing that he could say or do that was in any way necessary and he did not want to antagonize Eleanor, especially as he was afraid she would detect his fear of doing so in his voice. So he pretended interest in the books on the nearest shelf—the pompously bound Werke of some insignificant nineteenth century German. He didn't read German but he had a critical knowledge of names. Eleanor had somewhat ostentatiously taken Anita's temperature. Now he noticed with a mixture of satisfaction and apprehension that she was insisting that Anita went back to Mary at the hostel. Anita obediently packed up her books and left.

As he left the library with Eleanor she said :

"Oh, Richard, I'm afraid I really must go up and see the Professor for a few minutes. I've been doing some work for him and he particularly wanted me to call in this afternoon and let him know how it is going. Could you sit here in the sun for a little while?"

He was beginning to distrust this unusual, insidious politeness, more in the tone than in the words themselves. He realized that it reminded him of their first meeting when she had been a little nervous but had not been involved in any way.

"Of course," he said. "I've got my book with me."

Besides, it would give him a little time to think, to separate the elements in his reaction to seeing her again.

"I'll try not to be long," she said, "but the Professor likes gossiping so I may have to wait for the right moment to break away."

She went up some steps and through a large door into one of the unpleasant buildings—in late-nineteenth century laboratory style—which were laid out around what would have been a small parade ground but for the Nissen hut structures planted on it at regular intervals. By the side of one of them there were some substantial wooden benches and in front of them round metal tables of the kind in open-air cafés at South Coast resorts. He sat down and began to read. People passed, sat down and talked, bringing with them cups of tea and sandwiches. He wondered vaguely where they came from. A tall old man smiled faintly at him as though recognizing him as a lecture-room face.

The sun fell heavily on to his book, leaving only one corner in shadow. He moved from the bench and sat on a low sloping ledge behind, leaning forward to maintain his balance. His position matched the tension he felt mounting inside as the minutes passed and increased his feeling of conspicuousness. 'The Wrong Set'—he'd certainly got into that. He read until he could stand no more irony—his own or that of the author. And he stopped reading, too, because he could no longer hold back the flood of memories, the reassertions and revindications of himself that were always so close to the edge of his consciousness. Yet he struggled to maintain control over them. If he gave himself up to them she would notice. He knew only too well that he was never able to disguise his state of mind for long when he was with her. He wanted to avoid the helplessness he knew would accompany any such surrender and the shame that would follow it. He forced his eyes back to the page and his lips moved as he read slowly. But any suggestion of movement was enough to distract his attention. People crossed the tarred surface in front of him. He listened to each set of footsteps until he could tell that it was not Eleanor and then when the people came into sight he watched them until they disappeared because he wanted to show that it did not matter. When she came he was reading and he didn't notice until he looked up and saw her there.

"I'm so sorry, Richard," she said. "It was awful. He kept me waiting and then he just went on talking. I couldn't say I had to go because that would have offended him and you know how shaky this job of mine is."

He didn't know, but she was so genuinely apologetic that he let the anger that had been rising in him die down.

"Where shall we go?" she said suddenly.

Of course he had known that he would have to take her somewhere, though when she had been in love with him she hadn't cared what they did. He had decided that they would go for a walk in the afternoon, then to dinner at a place in Soho they often used to go to, finally to a new play she wouldn't have seen. But

after seeing her again and his experience waiting for her that he would never forget, he found the old attitude that he had fought against had returned. He felt already that he should not have come and cared little where he took her. But he would go through with it; perhaps it was as difficult for her as it was for him, and he was determined that she should not be bored as well.

"I thought we'd go to Ken Wood," he said.

She nodded slowly, like a solemn bird. It was a gesture he had forgotten, and recognizing it again made his blood race and sent a shiver of sadness through him.

They did not speak in the Underground train. She liked silent men, but this was not that kind of silence. Before they had broken it off their sadnesses had been full and tense, an agony for him that words could only increase. Speaking was flinging words into the testing furnace, stringing them out on a high wire for the winds to catch at. They said nothing now simply because there was nothing to say. He doubted now whether she would ever give him the help he needed to say those things which he had come to say. He had forgotten that he had also come to find out whether he wanted to say them.

When they got out of the train it was with a sense of relief. They walked up the hill on to Hampstead Heath. He did not know it well and did not care much if they got lost. She was wearing flimsy sandals that were not made for walking.

"Richard," she said, "if we go far you will have to carry me back."

He looked at her, but there was no softness in her eyes, only the first signs of irritation. They lay down in the long grass and he let his head fall back so that there was grass all round him making only an edge to the bright sky: he could not see her. Suddenly he felt very tired and without any effort at all he stopped wondering about her. Then she told him.

"It's strange to think I might have been married now," she said. Her voice was as distant as a choirboy's, as if it had rolled down green mountainsides to meet him. He wanted to look at her to see if her face was as expressionless as her words, but he did not move: he could face everything but her eyes. To look at them would be to shatter deliberately his illusion of unreality. For she was speaking words that he had imagined her saying in the worst times during those last months. He was a little surprised that the shock was not greater; then he felt numb and knew that he would be protected from being hurt by whatever she said now by her first words.

"Gordon and I were going to be married two weeks ago."

She enunciated her words very precisely and he knew that the memory of it was cutting into her very deeply. It was not this that affected him so much as the realization that this was a pain

from which he was completely excluded, which he had had no part in causing.

"Tell me about it," he said. "You see, I didn't know." She looked at him and he could see that she was surprised.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't know that you didn't know." She gave a quick smile that relaxed the atmosphere a little.

"Go on," he said.

She was embarrassed now.

"Well," she said slowly, "we decided not to marry. Then we were going to be married in September. He changed his mind twice in one evening." She laughed and she pulled savagely at a piece of grass she had wound round her finger. Obvious gesture, he thought mechanically.

"He didn't want me to take the examination at all at first. Then we decided I would and he helped me, but I hardly ever knew what I was doing. How could I listen to what he was saying when he had said he wouldn't marry me? You were quite enough trouble at first, and then this. I shall have to take the exams again next year. Oh yes, I took them all right—he telephoned me every morning and that helped—but I've failed. How *can* you pass if you don't finish any of the papers and you can't think straight enough to care about what you do know?"

It was his turn now to say: "I'm sorry." But he didn't. There seemed nothing he could do—either for her or for himself. Somewhere a remote part of his brain was still calculating. He could get up and run away; he could bury his face in the grass; he could go to her and pull her to him and kiss her and walk quietly away. But he didn't move. He had no more will to want to do anything: it had bled slowly away as she had been speaking.

"I'm hungry," she said.

He looked at his watch.

"That pub we passed ought to be open now," he said. "We could get some sandwiches there if that would be any use."

He stood up, looked at her, then turned and began to walk in the direction of the pub. When she got up she did not try to catch him up, so he had to wait for her. They walked into the public bar where someone was singing in French from a loudspeaker high on the wall. It seemed empty. There was an iron stove in the corner and the walls were dark. When their eyes became adjusted to the light they noticed a man huddled over a table near to the entrance. He had been hidden by the open door when they came in. The barman came from the back somewhere and the man by the door looked at them without nodding.

"Two beers," said Richard. "What sandwiches have you got?"

"Well, there's cheese . . .," the man began.

"That'll do," said Eleanor quickly.

"Four cheese sandwiches," he said.

"I only want one," she said.

The barman looked from one to the other.

"All right," he said, "two cheese sandwiches."

He took his beer and made patterns with his finger in the ring of liquid that the glass had left. They did not speak. Two clocks chimed the half hour. The cheese sandwiches came. The man who sat by the door shuffled and moved his glass and the the barman came and filled it for him. The music on the Radio stopped.

"Et maintenant nous présentons pour la première fois. . . ."

The barman turned the tuning knob on the set behind the bar and a confusion of sounds settled into the familiar sickly soothing of one of those orchestras usually confined to teatime.

"Don't you think Norrie's good?" said the barman.

The late afternoon sun had shifted so that a beam of it fell through a window on to the heavy iron stove, making it glow like ebony. They looked at each other, got up and crossed to the door.

"Good evening to you," said the man at the table.

"Thank you, sir," said the barman.

They were in the open-air again and there was a small fair ground that did not seem to be open. "A good film setting," he thought absently.

"Wait a moment," he said, and walked round to the gentlemen's. When he came back she was standing with her back to him watching a woman from one of the caravans inside the fair ground enclosure take down her washing. She was thickset and strong and wore a tattered black dress. Her bosom was swollen and her hair was long and black also. Some children ran past chasing a dog. Eleanor stirred her foot through the dust and the sun pricked out each speck in gold as it rose in the light wind. She began to tidy her hair. As he walked over to her she turned and smiled at him, but he didn't notice.

"I'll take you home now," he said.

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(All page references are to the "Collected Poems",
Cape, London, 1951)

Robert Frost, like other distinguished modern American writers, has not received as much attention in this country as he deserves, and consequently there is ample scope for a study of his work. He is not as good a poet as Allen Tate or Wallace Stevens—I do not intend making extravagant claims for him. He is a good minor poet, 'minor poet' being not a disparagement but a limitation, implying that, though he has written good and interesting poetry, he has not the range or the certainty of a great writer. And so an analysis of his poems has to deal with the strengths that make him worth reading, and with the limitations that keep him down to the status of a minor poet. His limitations are due to the restricted field of experience covered by his poetic activity and my second, complementary approach will be to indicate the nature of this field of experience. After this, I shall deal with his relation with other modern poets. His status as a minor poet and the type of poetic experience he gives are closely interwoven—in analysis they are no more than two ways of saying the same thing, and so I do not intend to separate them. In detailed analysis one approach illuminates the other, and I shall concentrate on a study of this kind. The third theme—Frost's relation to other modern poets—is best dealt with by itself.

Frost is a distinguished representative of a type of romantic poet that has emerged here and in America—the countryman. The countryman is a romantic because he is most interested in his own subjective experience and the quality of his own emotional life. Typically he is a solitary who enjoys long country walks, and even country work, like farming and gardening (though he usually prefers to observe other people at these tasks than to do them himself), who is knowledgeable about 'nature' in the limited sense of birds, trees, and flowers, and dislikes crowds and towns. The limitations of the way of life are extreme. Some of them are implicit in the very quality of the landscape of England and of New England. The landscape is tame and on a small scale. All the primeval quality has been taken out of it by centuries of cultivation and habitation. The climate is 'temperate' and the mountains would be called hills in any country that had real mountains. The countryman of England or New England is limited to having emotions about showers of rain, and the first celandine, and the wind in the trees. These things are altogether minor and lacking in significance, and to produce emotional elaborations about them is of the essence of sentimentality—intense emotion generated by a trivial cause. One of the few factors that can give these minor things significance is a communal sense of fertility—the swallows and daffodils of 'The Winter's Tale' mean something because they are part of a whole scheme of rebirth—moral, spiritual, and physical

—the satyrs are there, and the vital significance of fertility of crops and herds to an agricultural community. The swallows and daffodils are part of something living, communal, and religious. The countryman however is a solitary—he does not function vitally in the rural community and farming is to him either a hobby in which he can afford to lose money, or a picturesque occupation approved of by the National Trust.

The turning away from the main currents of human activity and struggle is even more serious. Shakespeare's attitude to Nature, as is clear from *The Winter's Tale* is of the same quality as his interest in the cosmopolitan and violent world of courts, brothels, wars, princes, crime, vice, and politics. But the countryman is an avoider of all this—he is either a neurotic, like Gray or Cowper, who needs the protection of that subdued, muted quality of living to preserve his sanity; or someone like Arnold of *The Scholar-Gypsy*, trying to escape from life, or at least to find 'restoration'; or, the most interesting case, the man who recognises a limitation of his interests, and decides to cultivate what he can. Frost and his great friend Edward Thomas are of this kind. They are compelled to be minor poets by their limited interests but they bring to limited capabilities a wholeness and robustness that the type does not often possess.

Wordsworth created in the English-speaking tradition the type of poetry that Frost develops according to his own approach—the kind of poem where a small country incident produces an emotional or spiritual illumination—*The Daffodils* is the most celebrated of these—*The Highland Reaper* shows the mode at its best. Clearly it is not the mode that produced Wordsworth's great poetry which is much more formal and more complex. It is the aspect of his work which is anthologised and which is presumably in the minds of those who call Wordsworth a 'nature-poet'. Frost describes the process of writing his own poems in very similar terms in an introduction to the *Complete Poems* :

'The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. . . . It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion.' (18)

Frost has written a number of good straightforward poems of this kind. One of the most attractive is called *The Gum-Gatherer* (165). It is highly typical of the mode: the poet meets a man, they talk, and the poet is left with a 'clarification', a kernel of truth to give the reader—

There overtook me and drew me in
To his down-hill, early-morning stride,
And set me five miles on my road
Better than if he had had me ride,

A man with a swinging bag for load
And half the bag wound round his hand.
We talked like barking above the din
Of water we walked along beside.

The incident has opened, the scene is well set, there are the touches of vivid description that we expect—'We talked like barking above the din / Of water we walked along beside'. The stranger turns out to be a solitary squatter living in the forests at the head of the valley, and collecting resin from the fir-trees—

What this man brought in a cotton sack
Was gum, the gum of the mountain-spruce.
He showed me lumps of the scented stuff
Like uncut jewels, dull and rough.

This is splendidly precise and evocative. The poem ends as precisely and unpretentiously, the emotions disciplined and kept small in proportion to the casualness of the incident—

I told him this is a pleasant life
To set your breast to the bark of trees
That all your days are dim beneath,
And reaching up with a little knife,
To loose the resin and take it down
And bring it to market when you please.

Frost however has written better poems than *The Gum-Gatherer*. These deal with a wider field of experience and control a much deeper emotional development by a very tough and versatile irony. The dangers of sentimentality in this approach to life of the countryman have already been referred to. There are other dangers and other failures which I shall point to after analysing the successes. For success in this limited mode, a poet needs a discipline. By cutting out so much of experience he has left himself very little scope, and to get the most out of what is left needs a very finely articulated impulse. Frost disciplines himself sometimes as we have seen already by a meticulous matter-of-factness; at other times and to better effect with irony.

The Wood-pile (123) is disciplined in this way, and is one of the best of Frost's poems. The irony rests in the poem's unexpected twists of direction—an approach to one kind of clarification turns out to be nothing but the means of directing the poet's mind to the true clarification. He is not telling us something in direct terms, but communicating his clarification by re-enacting a process of discovery. The fortuitousness of the discovery is given a full and deliberate stress and another aspect of the irony is that the discovery of something so important should be fortuitous. Frost has to work in this elaborate way to produce a good poem, because he is in a sense a didactic poet—at any rate, his poems always have a conclusion—a definite summarisable content. Often this content becomes a bald, flat 'conclusion', almost a 'moral', and not

something adequately worked for in terms of the artistic vision. But here by the dramatic means of re-enactment the conclusion is made part of a vision. The process can be seen in detail by working through the poem—

Out walking in the frozen swamp one grey day

I paused and said, 'I will turn back from here.

No, I will go on farther—and we shall see'.

Casualness of tone is established from the beginning—the conditions for the discovery were almost not established at all. There was no particular reason why the poet should not have gone home—There was nothing at all remarkable to detain him—

The view was all in lines

Straight up and down of tall slim trees

Too much alike to mark or name a place by . . .

Then a bird catches his attention and he meditates on that in true countryman fashion. Following its flight, he eventually comes casually on the poem's centre—

And then there was a pile of wood for which

I forgot him and let his little fear

Carry him off the way I might have gone . . .

The wood-pile is then described with Frost's usual meticulous precision. It is very old, and abandoned—

No runner tracks in this year's snow looped near it.

And it was older sure than this year's cutting,

Or even last year's or the year's before.

The wood was grey and the bark warping off it

And the pile somewhat sunken.

Then the clarification comes, as unobtrusively and as casually as the other incidents of the poem—

I thought that only

Someone who lived in turning to fresh tasks

Could so forget his handiwork on which

He spent himself, the labour of his axe,

And leave it there far from a useful fireplace

To warm the frozen swamp as best it could

With the slow smokeless burning of decay.

There is no sense of limitation here: the clarification is full and complex, impregnated with the whole atmosphere of peasant economy and peasant thrift, with the deadness of winter, the alternation of the seasons, and a completely grasped and assimilated sense of the natural process of growth and decay. And it is all done without any crude direct statement, entirely within the convention of the country walk and its discoveries, with all portentousness swept out of it by the tone of casualness and fortuitousness established by the irony.

When Frost communicates this fullness of experience he is something more than a countryman. In two other poems he seems to me to maintain this level of achievement. They are *After Apple-*

picking (88) and *An Old Man's Winter Night* (132). Both show that same intimate lived contact with the realities of peasant life and the rhythm of the seasons and of growth, and both have the controlling irony. The irony here is more in the relation of man to nature—in the groundwork of the poem itself than in the actual construction. Man's cares, efforts, and desires are set against the natural process to which they are so closely geared and their limitations are made apparent with the vividness of a chemical test. In *After Apple-picking*, the long sleep of winter in its coming on limits the poet's joy in the richness of his apple-harvest. He sees the whole landscape already through a sheet of ice—

I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight
I got from looking through a pane of glass
I skimmed this morning from the drinking-trough
And held again the world of hoary grass.
It melted, and I let it fall and break.
But I was well
Upon my way to sleep before it fell. . . .

So far I have only looked at successful poems. In analysing some of the half-successes and some of the failures that might have been good poems it will become clearer how essential some such discipline as this irony and meticulousness is to Frost, whose aims are small and whose self-imposed limitations make perfection or near-perfection a necessity for him. I hope such analysis will make clear how much he is limited by the life of the countryman, and how inevitable it is that he should be essentially as I have described him—a good minor poet without any real hope of being a great one.

In *Hyla Brook* (143) we can see a perfectly good poem limited drastically by its theme. The countryman here shows his touch of individualism, his refusal to be tied down to other people's ways of saying and doing things. But as is usually the case in such demonstrations of independence, he does nothing more important than to state a preference—baldly. The brook is described with his usual vividness—

Its bed is left a faded paper sheet
Of dead leaves stuck together by the heat—
A brook to none but who remember long.

The conclusion follows—

This as it will be seen is other far
Than with brooks taken elsewhere in song.
We love the things we love for what they are.

It is an attractive little poem, but the dangers inherent in such an approach are already apparent—the weight and deliberation which are put into the statement of so slight a theme clearly foreshadow sententiousness and crossgrained eccentricity. Frost's subtly articulated irony is degenerating into whimsicality; the statement is becoming more important than the vision; the rural sage is ready to emerge.

Frost's whimsicality is deplorable: the verse, no longer disciplined by irony or a tough matter-of-factness, collapses. Whimsicality ruins the narrative poems: all the characters speak like Frost being whimsical and enigmatic—like the familiar village bore who has come to believe himself 'a bit of a character'. The rambling paradoxes and reflections are all utterly trivial and without force. This slackness can destroy poems with greater potentialities than the narratives. Such a poem is *Mending Wall* (53). The opening is promising:

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell underit,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.

The poet and his neighbour meet to make repairs and the lively narrative-descriptive tone is maintained for a few more lines. Then the neighbour's remark that 'Good fences make good neighbours' makes Frost start speculating. Where they are doing repairs pine-trees face apple trees and there is no danger of damage by wandering cattle and this leads Frost to wonder *why* good fences make good neighbours:

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
'Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows . . .
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,
But it's not elves exactly and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.

The failure in tone, the fundamental lack of a very powerful impulse to say anything, and the rambling ineffectualness of the passage hardly need stressing.

Even the disciplining irony can be a danger when it starts from a false impulse. This is best seen in *Range-finding* (150), a poem much anthologised and presumably much admired. The first bullet fired in a battle—the range-finding shot—cut down a flower on which a butterfly was feeding and deceived a spider into thinking it had caught a fly, by grazing its web. The butterfly after a moment's loss of bearings fluttered down to the flower's new position; the spider after a quick survey withdrew to its waiting; a

bird whose nest was nearby carried on feeding its young. And that, Frost implies, is all that human disturbances amount to as far as the things of nature are concerned. The irony is there but the poem is trivial—offensively so. The precise notation of butterfly, bird, spider, and flower is vivid, as usual, but the battle isn't realised at all. The whole thing is cerebral and academic. Nothing better illustrates the unreality and lack of balance than to contrast the vividness of the natural description with the utter conventionality of the evocation of battle.

The battle rent a cobweb diamond-strung
And cut a flower beside a ground-bird's nest
Before it stained a single human breast.

The absurd euphemism 'stained a single human breast' should be put alongside the care lavished on the spider's web—

On the bare upland pasture there had spread
O'ernight 'twixt mullein stalks a wheel of thread
And straining cables wet with silver dew.

All the poems I have analysed so far were published before the end of the First World War. Since then, Frost has continued to write prolifically but has never equalled *The Wood-pile* and *After Apple-picking*. Even poems like *The Gum-gatherer*—not outstanding, but nevertheless good and pleasing—worth having—have been rare. As one would have suspected from such an analysis as the foregoing, what was once lived has degenerated into a rôle—that of the rustic sage or 'character'—the parish-pump philosopher. The carefully cultivated poise with which Frost at his best extracted good poetry from the approach to life of the countryman has crumbled in all directions. The fineness and sensitivity he had in dealing with country things has gone; so has the self-discipline and the effort of concentration which kept him from straying beyond his limitations. The bad narrative poems can now be matched by bad meditations on politics, human nature, archaeology, astronomy, socialism—all with the self-regarding waywardness of the village parliamentarian.

A sample of this vein is *Build Soil—a Political Pastoral* (346) produced in 1932. The familiar attitudes are laid down—the simple farming countryman who is not so simple after all, and isn't going to let himself be taken in by politicians—and the usual gibes at politicians. How woolly and lacking in trenchancy the performance is can be seen by comparing it with even the lighter verse of Auden—

. . . sheep is what I'm going into next.
I'm done forever with potato crops
At thirty cents a bushel. Give me sheep.
I know wool's down to seven cents a pound.
But I don't calculate to sell my wool.

I didn't my potatoes. I consumed them.
I'll dress up in sheep's clothing and eat sheep.
The Muse looks after you. You live by writing
Your poems on a farm and call that farming.

The dialogue ends with a call for sturdy independence—

Don't join too many gangs. Join a few if any.
Join the United States and join the family—
But not much in between unless a college.
Is it a bargain, shepherd Meliboeus?
Probably, but you're far too fast and strong
For my mind to keep working in your presence.
I can tell better after I get home,
Better a month from now when cutting posts
Or mending fences it will come back to me. . . .

It is limited and stale—'join the United States and join the family' is deplorable democratic (and Democratic) claptrap. But when one remembers *The Wood-pile* regret and not exasperation is the right reaction. Frost presents *par excellence* the ease of the artist with a limited but genuine gift who cultivates it for a while, then loses his clear-sightedness, and goes to pieces.

In conclusion I intend to consider Frost's relation to other modern poets and in doing this I hope it may be possible to recapitulate in a new setting some of the things that have already emerged.

The first thing that may be noted is the nature of Frost's development. I have not chosen to study his poetry at length in terms of development because his good poetry is remarkably homogeneous, and his failings and limitations are inherent in the conditions which produced his successes. Also, most of his good poetry appeared between 1914 and 1916—all that I have analysed except *Build Soil*, both good and bad appeared in *North of Boston* (1914) and *Mountain Interval* (1916). The degeneration after this date is foreshadowed and does not need to be enlarged upon but it is worthwhile pointing out, to Frost's credit, what he emerged from. Like any poet of his generation (he was born in 1875) he was brought up in the late nineteenth century morass of romanticising represented by Tennyson's bad poetry (not clearly discriminated at that time from the good) and the verses of the Pre-Raphaelites and Swinburne, with the Rhymer's Club as *avant-garde*. In New England, Frost would have had Longfellow as well. All the good poets among his contemporaries had to emerge from that, if they were to do anything remarkable. Yeats did it to an astonishing and heroic degree; Frost did it sufficiently to be a good minor poet. How great was his achievement can be seen by quoting from almost any of the earliest poems published in *A Boy's Will* (1913)—

I left you in the morning,
And in the morning glow,
You walked a way beside me
To make me sad to go.
Do you know me in the gloaming,
Gaunt and dusty-grey with roaming?
Are you dumb because you know me not,
Or dumb because you know? (32)

In terms of his literary associates Frost's limitations and his approach to literature—that of the countryman—becomes startlingly clear. He is half a Georgian. His best poetry was not written in the New England with which he is so closely associated, but at Beaconsfield in the Home Counties. His literary friends were not American poets but the English Georgians—Wilfred Gibson, Lascelles Abercrombie, Rupert Brooke, and Edward Thomas—and his first two collections—*A Boy's Will* (1913), and *North of Boston* (1914), first appeared in this country. His reputation was first made in England as a member of the Georgian group—the relevance of the description of the countryman-author, the amateur of rural things, living in a country cottage not too far from his publisher in London, which I gave in my introduction, now becomes completely clear. His upbringing in rural New England and his understanding of the realities of peasant life which occasionally comes through, give his work a toughness and earthiness that would be inconceivable in most of the Georgians. Edward Thomas is an exception to these strictures. He is a good poet—not quite as good as Frost perhaps, but in touch with more valid currents of living than his associates. But even Thomas is a little debilitating—the countrymen are so calm and quiet and colourless—even Frost is predominantly a Georgian—enough to make him difficult to read in bulk.

A last word about Frost and his contemporaries can be said appropriately in connection with the view of modern poetry expressed by Cleanth Brooks in *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (Poetry London, London, 1948). Brooks considers that the best modern poets have approached poetry in the spirit of the metaphysicals and the symbolists and that the strength of a modern poet is to be assessed in terms of the vividness of his metaphors and the presence of irony. This leads him into a one-sided survey of Frost (to say nothing of the other poets). His claim for linking the symbolists and the metaphysicals is that into their metaphors they both drew and resolved material of great diversity and apparent inconsistency. This is true as far as it goes, but it does not constitute a valid link and rests on a very superficial reading of both kinds of poetry. The symbolists were concerned with the image, which should be 'opaque' in contrast with the transparency of the conceptual statements of prose, and which should have a musical significance in itself to which meaning in the conceptual sense was subordinated. (I draw on Sartre's *What is Literature?*

for this terminology, which seems to square with the spirit of Verlaine, and Mallarmé, and some of Baudelaire and Rimbaud.) Metaphysical poetry is interested in 'meaning' above all and less interested in 'music' (the 'music' of the symbolists, not 'word-music') than almost any other type of poetry. It is surely concerned to thrust meaning by force on highly disparate and contradictory facts and ideas. All this makes Brooks's linking of symbolist and metaphysical techniques a dangerous proceeding even if he is only concerned with their use of metaphor and their irony.

The question of irony again, is dealt with a little too superficially. The irony of Laforgue is not the same thing as the irony of Donne—the link is no stronger than that we have two poets using irony. Irony and metaphor are only means not ends, and the unsatisfactoriness of Brooks's study is that he doesn't realise this. In fact, he is dogged by that fallacy of modern criticism that assumes that irony is something absolutely good and automatically to be approved of in literature—but as we saw in the analysis of *Range-Finding*, irony can be as trivial and as lacking in propriety as any other *means* of poetic composition. Consequently his remarks on Frost are wide of the mark. Frost is not trying to write metaphysical poetry or symbolist poetry. Even when his poetry is toughened by irony it is not the irony of Laforgue or the irony of Donne, and if his metaphors are sometimes good that is merely because all good poets sometimes have good metaphors. In missing the significance of the *persona* of the countryman Brooks has missed the central meaning of Frost's work, and illuminating as his book sometimes is (it is very good on the Fugitive group of poets) his categories do not penetrate deeply enough into the nature of poetic experience.

We are back at our original propositions: Frost as a countryman and a good minor poet.

VIGOUR WITHIN THE DISCIPLINE OF SHAPE

CHRISTOPHER LEVENSON

In this, as in his first volume, *Fighting Terms*, Thom Gunn shows himself to be one of the very few younger poets whose work it is profitable to discuss in terms of themes and concerns. In his second book, *The Sense of Movement* (Faber, 10/6) his earlier pre-possession with a rather adolescent toughness has been modified into a concern for human order versus the awareness of continual change and uncertainty, thus necessitating the presence of the human will as an impulse to action. This concern for decisive action as an escape from super-subtle and stultifying intellect leads to an attempt to establish, in the absence of any other permanent value, the will, instinct itself, as an absolute human value (with the accompanying danger of seeing its manifestations too frequently and too crudely). But if at present inadequate as a *weltanschauung*, his insistence on choosing, and his definition of human personality in such terms, is very effective as a stance, and coupled with an

assured technical skill that is no longer so intent on show, it gives a unity, purpose and strength to his best work. It is his willingness to generalise on vital issues in a way that no longer seems brashly knowing but authentically grounded in thought and experience that makes Gunn important and even at his weakest, potentially very good indeed.

One is aware continually of an idea—'vigour within the discipline of shape'—that finds its most convincing expression in *The Inherited Estate* (from which my title line is taken) and *To Yvor Winters*, 1955. This last poem is not only, and rather obviously, Yeatsian in respect of its language, but also in its attempt to celebrate the embodiment of an aristocratic, conservative ideal:

I leave you in your garden.

In the yard
Behind it, run the airedales you have reared
With boxer's vigilance and poet's rigour:
Dog-generations you have trained the vigour
That few can breed to train and fewer still
Control with the deliberate human will.

The whole stress of this poem is on order and discipline in face of an ultimately inevitable defeat. Apart from the intrinsic virtue of *facing* a problem which most contemporary poets have neatly avoided in non-committal miniatures, this seems to me very good poetry:

Where now lies power to hold the evening back?
Implicit in the grey is total black:
Denial of the discriminating brain
Brings the neurotic vision, and the vein
Of necromancy. All is relative
For mind as for the sense, we have to live
In a half-world not ours nor history's,
And learn the false from half-true premisses.

It is good precisely because it is saying something important, because Gunn is not afraid of speaking out directly without sheltering behind affected indifference and irony, and because he has the essential command of rhythm and movement necessary to re-inforce his argument.

Throughout this 'power' is visualised in specifically human terms, that is, terms dependent on human decision and choice. But to choose one must first recognise the possibilities by knowing one's own limits, and it is this search, first seen in *Human Condition* ('I see to break my span / I am my one touchstone') and later in *A Plan for Self-Subjection*, which provides the second major theme. The variety of forms in which Gunn symbolises this 'effort to recall identity' is remarkable. In *Saint Martin and the Beggar* his question 'Should I not peg my nature down / With a religious nail?' is answered later by the beggar he met in the storm—

My enemies would have turned away,
 My holy toadies would
 Have given all the cloak and frozen
 Conscious that they were good.
 But you, being a saint of men,
 Gave only what you could.

so asserting a standard of purely human fitness; in *The Allegory of the Wolf-Boy*, where human will is overmastered by an uncontrollable animal instinct, in *Market at Turk*, which is simply an emblem of restrained energy and resolution, in *The Beaters* ('Through violent parables their special care / Is strictly to explore that finitude'), and finally, perversely, in *In Praise of Cities*:

She presses you with her hard ornaments,
 Arcades, late movie shows, the piled lit windows
 Of surplus stores. Here she is loveliest;
 Extreme, material, and the work of man.

I do not believe that this praise is sincere. If it were, it would be inconsistent with the concerns shown in *To Yvor Winters*, 1955. It verges again on the deliberately shocking toughness and posing of much of *Fighting Terms*. Gunn's standards are essentially not materialist. If he praises 'brute purpose' it is primarily the purposefulness he admires, because it implies will and choice, and in any case an alternative to sterile inaction. This is perhaps most clearly stated in *Merlin in the Cave*:

Knowing the end to movement, I will shrink
 From movement not for its own wilful sake
 —How can a man live, and not act or think
 Without an end?

while in the first stanza of *The Inherited Estate*, dedicated 'To Mike Kitay, an American in Europe,' the opposing elements are realised in concrete terms:

A mansion, a string of cottages, a farm,
 Before you reach the last black-timbered barn
 And set your foot upon the path that leads
 Up to the hill where Follies and façades
 —Typical products of intelligence
 That lacks brute purpose—split, disintegrate,
 And, falling with their own rich weight,
 Litter the slopes, a record of expense.

Likewise, in *Lines for a Book*, Gunn is far from praising 'all the toughs through history' simply because they were toughs, but rather because their action broke the vicious circle of irresolution. It is better, he argues:

To be insensitive, to steel the will
 Than sit irresolute all day at stool
 Inside the heart; and to despise the fool
 Who may not help himself and may not choose.
 Than give him pity which he cannot use.

In *On the Move* and *The Unsettled Motorcyclist's Vision of his Death* Gunn accepts that the human will, though physically subordinate to nature, cannot submit, but sees nature less as an opponent than as the instinctive forces working themselves out as much in the motorcyclist's continual movement as in the wolf-boy—in his view the inevitable reaction of those 'born to fog, to waste' in the material and spiritual instability of the modern world.

By contrast, Gunn's numerous small poems about human relationships, where they do not achieve the graceful aperçu, complete in its very limited way, as in *First Meeting with a possible Mother-in-law*, relapse into involved and unconvincing conceit, easy paradox, or, as in *Thoughts on Unpacking*, an almost Elizabeth Jennings-like hypersensitivity. Clearly Gunn's best work is to be expected where vital belief or the will to belief is involved, though the political validity and consequences of these beliefs are no more relevant here than in the case of Pope or Yeats. They form a basis, whether real or imagined, from which to interpret the world and write.

I do not wish to suggest however that this basis is yet adequate: Gunn's stance is not always free from a sort of arrogant vulgarity that arises perhaps from an ultimate uncertainty as to the completeness of the system he advocates and embodies in his verse. The lines from *Lines for a Book* for instance—

I praise the overdogs from Alexander
To those who would not play with Stephen Spender

strike me as cheap and vulgar (quite apart from containing an unintelligible reference for many casual readers of modern poetry) simply because they are out of all proportion, and much of this poem is spoilt in the same way. Other symptoms of the same uncertainty are to be found in the frequent didactic over-emphasis of the more philosophical stanzas where conclusions are being drawn from the images presented (as if Gunn is not quite sure that the image or the symbol chosen is self-evident enough), and in the often tortuously complex syntax (v. the last stanza of *Birthday Poem*) that an insufficient use of punctuation does not help to clarify. Gunn's stanza forms are varied but mainly regular, he produces memorable lines and images, and his stanzas are unified by the logical development of a theme (*On the Move* is interesting in this respect), but too often otherwise vigorous phrases undergo a discipline of procrustean vigour and end in shorthand like 'direction where the tires press' or 'they strap in doubt by hiding it. robust', while at several crucial points the syntax is not yet simple enough to carry the full force of his meaning.

These are however relatively minor faults in comparison with the achievements of a book, which, in its general scope and ambitiousness, shows Gunn to have potentialities far beyond most of his poetic contemporaries.





